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House of Representatives

Gold Star Families Voices Act

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey... Mr. Speaker, I want to thank my good friend, Mr. HARPER, and Ms. ESTY for their strong support for the bill. Ms. ESTY is one of the cosponsors of the bill. I also want to thank Chairwoman MILLER for her leadership and good work in shepherding this important bill through the committee and Ranking Member BRADY for his support of the initiative.

I also appreciate the work of the committee staff, including Brad Walvort and Bob Sensenbrenner, and my legislative director, Cate Benedetti, and especially Majority Leader MCCARTHY and Kelly Dixon for posting the bill for consideration this afternoon.

I do rise in strong support and urge my colleagues to support the Gold Star Families Voices Act, legislation designed to ensure that immediate family members of servicemembers who are killed or missing in action or have died as a result of their service participate in the Library of Congress' Veterans History Project.

Congress created the project, as Mr. HARPER pointed out, to collect and catalog stories of American war veterans. We did this in 2000 to help preserve their memories so that current and future generations may hear and better appreciate the realities of war and the sacrifices borne by those who served in uniform.

The project is designed to turn their memories into our history to memorialize the lives of heroes whose selfless sacrifice has contributed, and continues to contribute, to our freedom and liberty and our collective understanding of who we are as a Nation.

It has been a great success. In fact, earlier this year, the Library announced that it reached a milestone, with 100,000 veteran stories archived. There are now more than 100,000 testimonies of veterans who served in military engagements since World War I in our permanent record.

However, conspicuously missing from the rich project's history are the veterans who made the ultimate sacrifice. Currently—which this bill will correct—the project accepts only firsthand accounts of living veterans, unintentionally leaving out the men and women who did not return from the battlefield and can no longer speak for themselves.

Mr. Speaker, this issue was first brought to my attention by Vietnam veteran Terry Fearon and the New Jersey Gold Star Mothers organization. Its president, Judi Tapper, the proud mother of Petty Officer First Class David Tapper, a Navy SEAL who was killed in Afghanistan on August 20, 2003, recently told me: "Never in history has there been a forum to replace our heroes' silenced voices."

Enactment of this bill will help change that. It will ensure we record and remember the lives and sacrifices of all who have served by providing family members the opportunity to create a lasting narrative and living record of their fallen loved ones.

This bill is endorsed by the national organization known as the American Gold Star Mothers, whose second vice president, Becky Christmas, said: The legislation gives our family, our children, a voice that they no longer have. The Gold Star Families Voices Act will ensure that the experiences and lives of all veterans, including our sons and daughters who fought and died for our country, are remembered, honored and preserved.

Mr. Speaker, during my quarter of a century of service on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and as we crafted this bill, I have had the great privilege of working with the Gold Star Mothers. They are an incredibly inspiring, committed, and dedicated group of women who have worked tirelessly and successfully to bring about meaningful change to better the lives of servicemembers, veterans, and their families.

So I urge my colleagues to pass this bill and honor the men and women who gave "the last full measure of devotion" in the service of our Nation by allowing their family members to tell their stories, so that all Americans can hear, appreciate, remember, and honor these patriots.